

HUNTING AND HEAT STROKE

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The 2003 pheasant season started off with the highest bird count South Dakota game officials say in forty years. Everyone, including the bird dogs, was pumped. Opening weekend normally draws approximately 145,000 hunters. In addition, opening weekend of October 18 and 19 also brought the hottest temperatures for that time of year in everyone's memory with temps ranging from the high 80's to low 90's. Unfortunately this year it was also a weekend of heartache for many. Estimates are over 100 dogs died opening weekend with an indefinite number of heat stroke victims who managed to survive.

Working dogs in extreme heat is not an unusual situation for me. Our season starts every year the first part of September on Sharptail Grouse and Prairie Chickens. The normal temperatures at that time of year on the prairie are 80°-100°+F. It's the period I'm getting my dogs in shape for our lodge's regular season on pheasants. But such early season, warm weather conditions are not limited to just South Dakota. Many ruffed grouse seasons in the northern states and quail seasons in the southern states all open at that same time of year. They all begin when heat is a very real factor. So why did this opening weekend in South Dakota cause such havoc and tragedy to so many dogs? This is a question that needs to be addressed as well as addressing how to avoid it happening in our hunting futures.

I've hunted and trained some forty years and have found that weather is always a factor whether it's 90 degrees or 20 below zero. You have to take into consideration the elements not only when preparing for yourself but for your dog as well. Many variables possibly came into play to create the dog disaster of this year and I'll try to address some of them to hopefully eliminate their recurrence in the future. I've hunted with clients and many different breeds of dogs in South Dakota for twelve years in differing weather conditions. Its part of my job to advise hunters on how to handle the conditions but the hunter who owns the dog has to listen.

1. Many people think that the northern plains states mean two things: lots of birds and cold weather. (Our temperatures in the summer can reach 110°+). The same hunter going to the south or west expects heat, but not in South Dakota.

2. Over-estimating their dog's ability to withstand excess heat. For every mile you walk behind your bird dog he is covering 3 to 7 times that distance. People also tend to drop their guard when temperatures level off in spring or fall and it may seem like a very pleasant day to you. However, the temperature at your dog's level closer to the ground is higher than the temperature at your level and especially so in heavy cover. It can be as much as 30° hotter where they are than what you're experiencing, so now 90°F becomes 120°F.

3. Water, clean and cool, is a must when hunting in higher temps. Many methods of watering in the field are available from vests with water packs to just plain water

bottles you carry in your hunting vest or on your belt. Never rely on giving him water only when you get back to the truck. When your dog shows signs of needing water, stop your hunt and give him a drink in the field! If you have to force him to hunt out he's saying "I need a break". Let him rest. Find some shade if you can. I personally carry bottled water with me at all times. My gun dogs all know how to drink out of a bottle. This accomplishes two things, you can always have a source of water with you and it eliminates any possible bickering over who gets to drink first. In my experience if a dog fight is going to happen, in many cases it's at the water bowl back at the truck.

4. Know the signs that your dog gives you. This is your responsibility and one that should be taken seriously. Heavy panting and lying down are two that should immediately flag you that your dog needs a break and a drink to cool down. Don't let your passion to shoot birds destroy your dog. His limits are just that – his limits. A lack of being in shape, his age or the elements all come into consideration. That seven month old pup is still just a kid, the older dog that can still get the job done but not quite like he did a few years ago, or that dog that is in his prime are all candidates. Remember that he's not a machine. A common situation that happens is the hunter expects more out of his dog than he does of himself. He or she's not in prime athletic shape but they don't understand why their bird dog can't run all day long (especially in the heat). While you're resting, look at his gums, look at the color – if they're starting to turn a dull greyish-pink or red he's in the early stages of heat stroke.

5. There are supplements available to assist your dog during those early, hot hunting days in the field. Gator Aid has been used for many years to replace electrolytes, minerals and carbs for athletes. Your dog is an athlete, his field of sports is CRP, cattail sloughs, heavy cover and woods. I've used several products that are on the market to assist the replenishment of electrolytes and minerals and I've added honey to water for the carbs necessary to replenish the expended energy supplies. There are also products made especially for working dogs. One I've had great results with is K-9 Bluelite. I've seen a noticeable difference with its use. It mixes with water and as they drink they're also getting the supplements they need.

6. Know the makeup and needs of your dog. When you take responsibility of owning and hunting a gun dog you as the owner take on the responsibility to care for and maintain them. To properly understand how educate yourself and be conscious of their needs as well as their strengths and weaknesses. That dog will hunt himself to death if you allow it. Opening weekend in this state proved that. You must place their well being first and the bird limit second. Every one wants to shoot birds over their dogs but don't let the hunt's importance overrule common sense.

7. Never leave a dog in a closed vehicle, staked out in the sun or closed in a hot crate. It's especially important not to do so if the dog has already gotten overheated or exhausted. They need to cool their body temperatures. A dog's temperature is normally between 101°F and 102°F. If he cannot expel the heat fast enough his body temperature will rise. At 105°F your dog can no longer cope with reducing his body heat. As the oxygen demand rises and he is no longer keeping up with his temperature will continue to

rise. When the temperature hits 108°F the heart, brain, liver, kidneys and intestinal tracts start to break down.

8. What can we look for in our dogs to keep this from happening to us? And if it does, how do we address the situation.
 - a. Watering on a regular basis is a must, keep plenty in the truck and carry some on your person.
 - b. When you're hunting an area locate the phone number and location of the local veterinarian and have it handy.
 - c. Know the signs of heat stroke: red and sticky gums, weakness, staggering, excessive panting, diarrhea, vomiting. The early signs of heat stroke can be followed within minutes by collapse, seizures, coma and death.
 - d. If your dog does show signs of heat stroke don't pack him in ice, this could put him into shock. If you can get him to a bath tub or stock tank cover him with water. If these are not available use a hose or pour water over him and then get him to a vet as soon as possible. Immediate treatment is critical to success so delays are potentially harmful or fatal.
 - e. Don't cover a dog with heat stroke even with a wet towel. This will only hamper his body's ability to dispel the heat. Neither should you put him in a crate, keep him with you.
 - f. If your dog does get heat stroke, take him to your own veterinarian when you get home to check for liver and kidney damage. Even immediate treatment and effective cooling can leave the dog with internal damage and long term health concerns.

In my experience of hunting, training and breeding hunting dogs over the years, what I've seen is that the average hunter may spend an average of about 14 days in the field upland hunting with his dog, in many cases much less. There are 50 other weeks of the year when the hunting trips will be past and your friend will still be there laying next to your chair as you reminisce what the two of you experienced together. Be as dedicated to your canine friend as he is to you. The 2003 opener here in South Dakota with the high temps and so many dogs being affected by it has made us all reflect on how to never let it happen again and why it did this time. We can't change the weather but we can take as many precautions as possible to assure that whatever the weather may be while we are hunting our bird dogs their health and safety comes first and foremost. The next time we go afield with that friend that has given us so many days of joy and successful hunting, remember we are their keeper, protector and the ones responsible for their safety. Rather than thinking that it'll never happen to you assume that it could or will and be prepared.